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ABSTRACT

Two Finnish courses in business English were designed to teach students language that will enable them to negotiate effectively in English. The instructional approach is based on an analysis of recorded negotiations carried out in British subsidiaries of Finnish companies. The analysis identified a group of linguistic variables through which, it is proposed, negotiation strategy is created and manipulated. On the macro-level, two conversation phases were discriminated: gathering and encounter. The encounter phase was further divided into three phases (chat, discussion, and bargaining) and the characteristics of each phase were noted. On the micro-level, three types of speech acts were found: acts contributing to the negotiation climate (mitigation, emphasis, address); topic-oriented acts; and silent acts. Additional significant variables include: lack of threats, demands, and negative-affect acts; persuasive behavior in the form of statistical, example, analogy, or causal self-support argumentation, combined with other-support and positive-affect acts; chat phases interspersed among topic-oriented phases; predominance of discussion phases over bargaining; floor-sharing, involving frequent floor-changes; and in topic development, alternation of preferred items (good news) and dispreferred items (bad news). Further research is recommended. (MSE)

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THE LANGUAGE OF NEGOTIATION STRATEGY

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I Introduction

There was once a novice in a convent. She had the bad habit of smoking. She suffered when she couldn't smoke, and the long prayers, in particular, were difficult times for her. Finally she couldn't bear the se sions any longer, so she went to Mother Superior and asked her for permission to smoke. She said,"Mother Superior, can I smoke when I pray?" She didn't get the permissio..

There was another novice in a different convent,who had the same problem. She also wanted permission to smoke. But she said,"Mother Superior, can I pray when I smoke?" Permission was granted.

That was strategy.

What can we, as linguists and language educators learn from this story? The two requests contained exactly the same lexical items and the same grammatical structures; yet, one was effective communication, producing the desired result, the other one was not. Exactly the same amount of effort from the language teacher and the learner would have been required to formally teach and learn both requests. Why not best spend our time teaching the effective one?

This is why I have been studying negotiation strategy: to be able to teach my business English students the kind of

language which will enable them to conduct effective negotiations in English. The aim of this study is to produce a linguistic model for the description of strategy in linguistic terms. The model is presented in the form of a group of variables with which strategy can be created and manipulated.

II Data and Methodology

The study is based on audio-recordings of business negotiations carried out in British subsidiaries of Finnish companies. The detailed analysis concentrates on one 40-minute negotiation between two Brits, ie. native speakers of English. The recording was made by the Seller, who was the UK representative of a Finnish company, with the permission of his opposite party, who was the representative of an important wholesale customer. No outsider, not even the researcher, was present. The recording was then transcribed.

As a preliminary step, the recording and the transcription were studied by two negotiation skills experts. Both characterized the negotiation as 'distributive'/'cooperative'/'collaborative'. (For a description of the various negotiation strategies see Johnston 1982; Fisher and Ury 1981)

Then, the negotiation event was divided into macrostructural phases (see separate sheet/conference transparency).

The basic macrostructural dichotomy is that of gathering and encounter (see Golopentia-Eretescu 1974). A gathering refers to a phase in a negotiation, where the degree of organization and cooperation between the participants, as well as situational preplanning, are minimal, even perhaps nil. In short, gatherings are phases which, in a transcription, would be classified as 'inaudible, many voices speaking together.' They are unorganized, chaotic discourse, whereas encounters represent organized

interaction, which renders itself to transciption conventions.

In studies of conversations, gathering phases are often excluded from the analysis, although they are an integral part of most conversations. I did NOT ignore them; I focused my attention on the utterances immediately preceding a gathering, as well as the utterances with which organized discourse was resumed. I discovered that a gathering was utilized to grab the floor. Unorganized discourse was switched back into organized form with an utterance which was either heavily laden with new (and weighty) information on the actual negotiation issues, or an utterance that was linguistically marked with prosody plus words like 'So...', 'Well then ...', 'Well, look ...'; also address and meta-statements were used to grab attention. The ability to create a gathering, and then to emerge from it as floo-holder, would therefore seem to be a tactical communication skill, very useful in a negotiation.

An encounter was divided into three phases: 1) the chat phase, the main function of which is to provide for the existence of interaction-oriented sociability (see Rubin & Brown 1975; Bales 1953). A chat phase is defined as two people talking meaningfully to and with each other in such a way that both are interested in sustaining the state of talk and cooperate to keep it going. (2) the discussion phase, where the negotiators talk to and with each other about some particular thing. It is a topic-oriented process, the aim of which is the elicitation and exchange of information, though not reaching a solution. (3) the bargaining phase, where the negotiators talk to and with each other, about some particular thing, in order to make a decision or to reach agreement. There is strong emphasis on result and agreement: polarity and controversy are built-in expectations. A summary of the characteristics of the various macrophases is given on a separate sheet /conference transparency.

On the microlevel of analysis, the non-linguistic research done on negotiations by Putnam & Jones (1982) was combined with the act categories of Sinclair & Coulthard (1975), as well as the conversation analysis of Jefferson (1972). Ideas that were distilled from this were merged with findings from psychological, sociological, and business managerial negotiation studies (see eg. Raiffa 1982; Danziger 1976; Gendron 1984; Pruitt 1981).

All this allowed me to identify which structural components were more relevant than others for strategy creation. Of course, there had to be some regrouping and redefinition. It is this process of developing the conceptual framework that takes up the bulk of the study.

III Findings

A combination of the macro- and microlevels of analysis provides a group of linguistic variables through which, I suggest, negotiation strategy is created and manipulated.

As to the smallest level of analysis, three main types of acts were identified, which are obviously important for strategy creation: a) acts which create negotiation strategy by contributing to the negotiation climate: mitigation, emphasis, address; this category also includes acts which, following Putnam & Jones (1982) are referred to as positive affect or negative affect. (b) topic-oriented acts, which contribute to the creation of strategy through their sequential organization and the clusters which they are perceived to form. These include what Putnam & Jones (1982) refer to as self-support acts and other-support acts, and are particularly useful in describing argumentation. c) silent acts, which reveal - and this is daunting for the overseas learner of English - that, in a negotiation, there is no way of NOT producing a communicative act or a move: refraining from the production of a verbalized / vocalized move will merely result in the production of a

silent act, which, in the negotiation context, is taken to be a deliberate, strategic move.

The macrostructural phases proved interesting, and differences between them could be identified on all the levels analysed - acts, moves, exchanges, and cycles. For example, it was discovered that in the chat phases there were no silent acts; in discussion phases there were quite a few, and even more in bargaining phases. This suggests that interactive cooperation takes the form of swift turn-taking in chats, and, in discussion and bargaining phases, slower turn-taking - with silence even within a turn, allowing the interactant to work out what he wants to say without hurrying in and possibly grabbing the floor.

Differences between the phases could also be identified in length of utterances, as well as the type of individual topic-oriented acts used. More study is, however, required.

Finally - and this concerns specifically a cooperative strategy - the study suggests that the following variables make a significant contribution:

a) lack of threats, demands, and negative affect acts;
b) persuasive behaviour in the form of statistical, example, analogy or causal self-support argumentation, combined with other-support acts and positive affect acts;
c) chat phases interspersed among topic-oriented phases;
d) the predominance of discussion phases over bargaining phases, ie. a tendency to convert a conflict into a situation where (controversial) information is exchanged and elicited.
e) floor-sharing, involving frequent floor-changes;
f) in topic development, alternation of preferred items, ie. good news, and dispreferred items, ie. bad news.

The above is merely a list of immediately emergent variables. Again, more detailed research is required, on more extensive data, especially on the problem of floor-holding and floor-grabbing, which are essential skills for a negotiator.

IV Practical Applications

The findings and the conceptual framework presented above were used to produce two advanced level language courses: one for business executives and one for undergraduate MBA students.

The business executives' course was made for the Finnish Institute of Marketing. It consists of written material, three cassettes, and a two-day seminar. Part A of each unit gives the negotiation skills input - the theory of negotiating. Part B of every unit contains examples of useful phrases for the various phases of a negotiation, together with a Finnish commentary on the appropriate degree of formality/informality, friendliness/aggressiveness, politeness, firmness etc. Concepts like mitigation, self- or other-support, positive / negative affect are not necessarily mentioned by name, but the language involved is taught. Part C provides revision of key structures for those who need it. Grammatical structures are organized according to their relevance for negotiation strategy. In practicing (cooperative) argumentation the student is, for example, reminded of the various structures available for expressing cause, reason, and consequence. When he learns about the tactical use of mitigation, the student will review structures for varying degrees of compulsion and obligation, expressing uncertainty, suggestin-, recommending - instead of commanding and ordering.

In this way, the language the student is already familiar with falls into place, and gains strategic significance.

During the two-day seminar, the students go through a basic negotiation, stage by stage, practising the language they have studied, and observing the effects on themselves and others of the language. The culmination is a major two-stage negotiation event, roughly three hours from beginning to end, with two rival teams trying to get a business contract. This is video'd, with feedback and discussion.

The course for the undergraduate MBA students follows roughly the same pattern. Interestingly, their youthfulness seems to make them much more competitive and far less cooperative than the business executives.

It is explained to both groups of students that the aim of this particular language course is not so much to teach them any new language items, but to use to the full the potential offerd by the language they already know, to help them become aware of its strategic significance in negotiation interaction. A lot of attention is also paid to cross-cultural aspects of negotiations.This is of particular importance for Finland, which is a small country in the northeastern corner of Europe, geographically and linguistically separated from the rest of the world. For Finnish businesses, the English language opens the door to international operations.

The feedback received from these two pilot courses has been very encouraging. Course members commented that it was a challenge, and that it taught them to look at communication from a new angle, that the English they knew gained significance ...

What it taught me, the language teacher, was that students can cope with far more sophisticated tasks than we sometimes give them credit for. On the other hand, what the research process revealed was that a negotiation event cannot be taken as one homogenous activity. It must be broken up into its constituents, and the language of the various phases and their different features studied separately. Students appreciate this, and, at the end of the course, they, too, realize that a negotiation is a subtle complex of differentiated discoursal elements which need delicate tactical manipulation.

The reward for impressing this on a group of students is allround satisfaction, enthusiasm, and high motivation.